



Interpreting Logical Appeals – “Letter from Birmingham Jail” Foundation Lesson – High School

Skill Focus

Levels of Thinking				
Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate
Close Reading	Grammar		Composition	
Reading Strategies Determining Author's Purpose Determining Main Idea Generalization Inference Paraphrase Literary Techniques Argumentation classification deductive/inductive reasoning logical appeals Elements of Research Ethics of Research Use of Print Sources Use of the Internet				

Materials and Resources

- “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Close Reading Foundation Lesson: “Interpreting Ethical Appeals”
- Close Reading Foundation Lesson: “Interpreting Emotional Appeals”

Lesson Introduction

In this lesson, the students will study two paragraphs from Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” paragraphs in which he employs a logical argument to convince his audience that his actions are moral and correct. The student will identify King’s *concession*, *counterargument*, and *sylogisms* (deductive reasoning.) The student will identify other logical techniques King uses: *reliance on authority* and *facts as evidence*. The student will identify statements by St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine that support King’s argument, statements both in the text and found through research.



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During non-violent demonstrations for racial equality in Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested and jailed for eight days. He wrote this letter to white clergymen to explain his actions and to answer those people who urged him to call off the demonstrations he had called for. He responds to his critics who claim that he and other African-Americans should wait for the federal, state, and local governments to make changes.

King’s letter uses all three persuasive appeals – logical, emotional, and ethical. *Logos* loosely translates to “logic.” A logical appeal depends on reasoning and evidence, appealing more to the audience’s intellect than their emotions. Logical reasoning depends on the following:

- deductive reasoning
- reliance on authority
- facts as evidence
- research
- tradition (precedent)
- cause/effect
- effective metaphors

King writes the following using a logical appeal:

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court’s decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may well ask: “How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?” The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that “an unjust law is no law at all.”

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.... Hence segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful.



A *concession* is an expression of concern for the feelings of those who may disagree with the writer's position. Using concession is a good way to overcome the reader's resistance to a controversial position (for instance, breaking the law). And concession shows the writer to be both a logical thinker (one who knows and understands what the other side believes) and a concerned, fair-minded person who realizes that every argument has two sides. Using a concession takes away the major weapon of the opposition.

1. Which sentences in King's speech make up his *concession*?

A *concession* is one part of another persuasive device called a *counterargument*. A counterargument consists of two parts:

- concession
- refutation (asserting that an opponent's arguments are wrong and arguing against them)

2. Which sentences in King's speech make up his *counterargument*?

Martin Luther King uses *deductive reasoning* in these paragraphs, in which a general conclusion leads to a specific conclusion.

Deductive reasoning is frequently stated in a three-part statement called a *syllogism*. Here is one example:

- (general statement) The Declaration of Independence proclaims that all people the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."
- (particular example) People of color and women are people.
- (conclusion) Therefore,
no one should enslave another,
women should be allowed to vote, etc.

3. King develops a syllogism in the second paragraph. Write out the parts. You will have to change King's wording somewhat. Here is your general statement:

a. Laws that degrade the human personality are unjust.

Now you add the rest of the syllogism:

b. (particular example) _____

c. (conclusion) Therefore, _____

4. King develops another syllogism, this one more implicit, which justifies his breaking the law. Try writing out the three parts of this syllogism. This time you are given the conclusion.

a. (general statement) _____

b. (particular example) _____

c. (conclusion) Therefore, King and his followers have a moral obligation to break the laws of segregation.

Reliance on Authority

King cites two authorities highly respected by educated and moral people, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine. Research both men on the web or in a reference book. One of St. Augustine's statements is quoted above by King. Find another statement that Augustine wrote that would support King's position. Write one of St. Thomas Aquinas' statements that would support King's position.

5. St. Augustine: _____

6. St. Thomas Aquinas: _____

7. Explain in a sentence or two why King would use these two men as references.



Facts as Evidence

King argues that two types of laws exist: just and unjust. He further states that he advocates “obeying just laws.”

8. Cite two laws which to you seem just, and explain why you think they are just.
- a. Just law _____
- Explanation _____
- b. Just law _____
- Explanation _____
9. Now cite two laws which you think are unjust, and explain why you think they are unjust.
- a. Unjust law _____
- Explanation _____
- b. Unjust law _____
- Explanation _____